

precarious time: queer anthropocene futures

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As a term intended to name a new epoch, the Anthropocene is intimately entangled with questions of time. This paper suggests that the onset of the Anthropocene marks the failure of anticipated capitalist futures, and in doing so generates subjective futurelessness and disorientation. To read these experiences for their ethical and political potential, I bring Marxist and decolonial readings of the Anthropocene into contact with queer theory concerned with temporality and futurity. Bringing these frameworks together allows for an interpretation of the loss of capitalist futures within the Anthropocene and positions this as a political opportunity for the elevation of alternative future imaginaries. Queer theory provides an example of how failure and futurelessness can be read as rich with political possibility. Further, it demonstrates methods for locating, interpreting and drawing upon diverse cultural and intellectual archives to identify alternative images of the future and clarify strategies for their pursuit. Structurally, this account begins by investigating the origins of capitalist images of the futures through reviewing histories and ideologies of capitalist time and exploring how they participate in the production of, and are disrupted by, the Anthropocene. This paper then mobilises queer temporalities in order to re-vision the Anthropocene as the failure of capitalist reproduction. Framing this as a refusal, I seek differing models of futurity within queer theory and other marginalised discourses, including black and Indigenous futurisms. Finally, I suggest that queer theories of grief and loss may help guide processes of transi-

tion between differing future imaginaries. The image of the Anthropocene that emerges is that of an end of times; but as I suggest, if the times ending are the times of capitalism, new futures are overdue.

INTRODUCING: THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Anthropocene is contested; debate continues around the term itself, the time period it designates and the phenomena it names. According to the Anthropocene Working Group (a group of mainly Earth System scientists), the name “Anthropocene” was originally suggested to mark a proposed new geological epoch in which “human imprint on the global environment has... become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system.”¹ However, interest in the term has since strayed from its geological origins. It has become a kind of cross-disciplinary zeitgeist term used variously for discussing and debating the relationship between human and nonhuman beings and forces, and the current era of environmental crisis.² The Anthropocene refers, famously, to the era of climate change, but also to the era of nuclear testing and nuclear bombs; the era of disposable plastics; of widespread pollution of the land, air, and water; of ocean acidification; and of mass extinction. Further, it promises to be the era of continuing sea level rises, climate refugees, and resource wars. On a geological scale, these transformations have only just begun. But they have begun: as climate researcher Dr Phil Williamson said in a recent interview about climate change and the Northern hemisphere heat waves of 2018, “this is definitely not a case of crying wolf, raising a false alarm: the wolves are now in sight.”³

Anthropocene discourse is vast and cross-disciplinary and grinds along numerous friction points.⁴ Critical literature around the Anthropocene includes inquiries into questions of agency and responsibility⁵ and related attempts at reorienting understandings of human beings as “biological agents,” “geological agents” or a “species.”⁶ Critics argue that the term thus can exaggerate and oversimplify the story of human agency, giving the impression that (a) human beings are in control of what is happening⁷ and (b) that responsibility for the current ecological crisis is shared equally by all humans,⁸ or even that it is an inevitable outcome of humanness.⁹ These disagreements play out, for instance, in arguments around the starting date of the Anthropocene. The date suggested in 2016 by the Anthropocene Working Group is the mid-20th Century, correlating with the “Great Acceleration.”¹⁰ Political conservatives such as the Ecomodernists

favour far earlier starting dates, gesturing towards the deep human past and directing the conversation towards grand narratives accumulating in a “good Anthropocene” defined by the continued progression of capitalism and technology.¹¹ This renders the Anthropocene as an unavoidable event and assigns its cause to “human nature.” In doing so, it reframes environmental destruction as a foreordained and ethically neutral process, locating contemporary ecological woes as an uncomfortable moment in a broader human timeline which continues towards greater fulfilment of ambitious techno-capitalist destiny.¹² This reading of the Anthropocene does not aim for, or inspire, political change.

Unsurprisingly, alternative accounts have been offered. These can be seen in contestations about differing potential starting dates, most often connected to moments in capitalist development. Theorists often pair these suggestions with proposals for non-Anthropocene titles for a post-Holocene epoch, the most popular of which is “Capitalocene,” used by Marxist theorists Donna Haraway¹³, Jason Moore¹⁴ and Andreas Malm,¹⁵ among others. By focusing on the environmental impacts of capitalism, Capitalocene theory brings into view specific sets of events, behaviours and institutions that have generated (and in many cases, continue to generate) mass environmental degradation. Capitalocene theory also has a better capacity to name the great inequality in the distribution of benefits and damages otherwise masked by the homogenisation of humankind inherent in the term Anthropocene.

A great diversity of opinion remains amongst those who agree on the significance of capitalism to the story at hand. Some thinkers, such as Paul Crutzen, propose a 17th Century start date, which correlates to the Industrial Revolution. This would serve to highlight connections between contemporary environmental devastation and a specific history of resource exploitation under capitalism, hinging on the use of fossil fuels.¹⁶ Capitalocene theorist Jason Moore instead sees the rise of (preindustrial) capitalism in “the long 16th century” as the true source of the current state of crisis of the coproducing entities of nature and capital. As Moore points out, power relations and techniques of control over human and ecological forces developed within early capitalism were required to set into motion the processes that would later interact with fossil fuels and technological developments and generate industrial capitalism.¹⁷

Moore describes capitalism as the outcome of the interlinked exploitation and appropriation of “labor-power, unpaid human work and the work of nature as

a whole.” Here “unpaid human work” refers to reproductive labour, as well as slavery and colonial exploitation.¹⁸ Colonialism is central to this account, because it creates the conditions for paid and unpaid labour, as well as the non-human resources that have driven capitalism from the outset. This is of great political significance, shattering illusions of the Anthropocene as an equal creation of all humanity and therefore revealing that responsibility is not evenly distributed. In their article “On the importance of a date, or decolonizing the Anthropocene,” Heather Davis and Zoe Todd insist upon periodisation based on the onset of Western¹⁹ Colonisation of the Americas.²⁰ Significantly, they ask: “[i]f the Anthropocene is already here, the question then becomes, what can we do with it as a conceptual apparatus that may serve to undermine the conditions that it names?”²¹ In response to this appeal, this paper draws inspiration from Capitalocene theory, while maintaining an attachment to the imperfect term “Anthropocene” in order to participate in, and put to work, the broader conversations that are already on the move. I seek to leverage the concept to further reveal the reproductive processes of capitalism, the temporalities these processes generate, and how these temporalities work to obscure and perpetuate their origins in the exploitation of human and nonhuman materialities.

THE ANTHROPOCENE AS A BREAK IN CAPITALIST TIME

I argue that the Anthropocene causes a disruption that results from, but in turn alters, capitalist time. To dig into the rich potential of this transformation, it is useful to consider two major themes that arise in research concerned with time and capitalism: abstraction and future-facing linearity. These themes underpin core capitalist concepts of constant growth and progress. The abstraction of time has played a vital role in the extraction and coordination of labour. Drawing from “methods of temporal regulation” of monastic and military origins, capitalist time regulates the movements of workers and the rhythms of work days “penetrate[ing] the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power.”²² Capitalism binds time to work, and in doing so calls into being measurable time, set apart from subjective times experienced in the body or cyclic processes of the more-than-human world.²³ In coordinating human subjectivity and work, this quantification of time shapes interaction with the materiality of the nonhuman world, which has also undergone related processes of abstraction²⁴ on the road to being re-conceptualised as a source of exchangeable, inert resources. The resulting detachment of the temporal organisation of daily life from locally embodied rhythms and specificities allows for the invention of “universal” time. The

globalisation of standardised time is a longstanding component of colonialism, overwriting and undermining diverse non-Western temporal ontologies.²⁵ Viewed in its historical context, “standardised time” is revealed as a Western colonialist imposition and part of a broader flattening, abstraction and homogenisation of time under capitalism.

It is through these processes of abstraction that the future-facing linearity of capitalist time emerges. Only once time has conceptually disconnected from materiality, and therefore material limitation, can foundational capitalist fantasies of constant growth and progress gain ideological traction. Investigations into the origins of this divide reveal complex histories through which the material reproduction of capitalism has fallen from view, as both the sources of value and the disposal of waste products have been (and continue to be) obscured. Fossil fuels have played a powerful and unique role. In *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm details the specific physical attributes of coal that contributed to this process. For Malm, the “spatiotemporal profile” of coal as (seemingly) “dis-embedded, solitary, fissiparous” rendered it an ideal energy source for “the tournament of self-sustaining growth” that ignited early industrial capitalism.²⁶ In other words, aspects of coal’s materiality allowed it to function as though it was source of endless energy, abstracted away from its material origins and devastating by-products. This abstraction bolstered an illusory image of endless growth, as did the arrival of many of the raw materials of early Western Industrial capitalism from geographically distant colonise lands.

Vanished also within linear temporalities are processes of human reproduction. Marxist feminist Silvia Federici writes that capitalism, as a “social system of production... does not recognise the production and reproduction of the worker as a socio-economic activity... but mystifies it instead as a natural resource or a personal service.”²⁷ Thus, reproduction is harnessed in the service of production and pulled into a capitalist futurity. Other, potentially cyclical readings of reproductive time are obscured when reproduction operates to support the renewal of working men’s bodies “for re-entry into the time of mechanised production and collective national destiny.”²⁸ The overlaying and disruption of Indigenous temporalities under colonialism also occurs in part, at least, at the level of reproduction. Sex, gender and reproduction are vital grounds for the existential elimination of Indigenous populations at the heart of, in particular, settler colonialism, via projects such as forced sterilisation and child removal, working as elements of the “naturalisation of settler colonialism” via the “indigenisation of settlers.”²⁹

These operations of the reproduction of capitalist futures again are hidden from sight as by absorption into the natural, further promoting capitalist temporalities of unceasing advancement and prosperity without material limitation.

The significant material changes of the Anthropocene interrupt capitalist conceptions of time as abstracted and linear. Mass environmental degradation reveals a biosphere unable to support endless exploitation. Anthropocene time has a linearity of its own, in that it seems increasingly clear that the future will not resemble the past. However, this has a very different experiential texture to the linearity of constant growth within capitalism. That is to say, time feels different in the Anthropocene. A temporal vertigo is generated through the shifting time scales of this epoch.³⁰ Also unsettling is the eerie disruption of chronobiological cycles; the hard finality of extinction; the haunting of the past and, significantly, the fearsome unreadability of the future.³¹ Here endless growth is exchanged for unstable futures. The material limits vanished under capitalist projects of abstraction are becoming visible in the Anthropocene in the form of increased precarity. Heightened economic and environmental precarity are symptomatic of shifts and changes that reveal the failing of some dominant narratives of futurity to correlate with material possibility. Some of what Lauren Berlant calls “good-life genres” are becoming harder and harder to call into being.³² It is becoming increasingly clear that some imagined futures, interwoven with individual subjectivities in the form of narratives of future possibility, will never arrive. In particular, imagined capitalist futures that hinge on the plausibility of endless growth appear more and more impossible.

The expression of capitalist futures for individuals and communities varies widely and includes progress narratives, work ethic, and meritocracy. To draw from contemporary Australian examples, these might manifest in ideas around family, home ownership, career paths, acquisition of consumer goods, and possibilities for accruing wealth within lifetimes and across generations. For many people, including many people in Australia, but even more so for large numbers of people living in the Majority World, goals such as these have never been achievable. In many instances, these goals may not be desirable. And yet, under global capitalism, they still have a kind organising power; they function like an ethic, in that they guide choices and contain criteria for success and failure. These goals have a structuring role for broad economic and political decisions, including those of development³³ and for the political rhetoric used to justify them. The arrival of the Anthropocene can be read as an indication that these futures are failing in part at

least because they are based on capitalist dreams of constant growth that are at last hitting up against material limitation. Here capitalist time falters—good riddance to it—but dominant visions of the future falter along with it. Such loss to accustomed resources for self-narrativisation can produce profound disorientation and a sense of *futurelessness*. This collapse into the present³⁴ impacts capacities for planning and thus for collective movements. A potential conundrum of precarious Anthropocene time emerges as a heightened need for political action (in order to build new, more sustainable, more just futures) paired with a reduced capacity for the kind of organisation that such actions requires. In order to work through this failure of capitalist futures and the futurelessness that it engenders, this paper now brings these problems into contact with queer theories of temporality and futurity.

QUEER TEMPORALITIES: QUESTIONING REPRODUCTION

Queer theory provides a valuable collection of resources for engaging with Anthropocene futuresless. A diverse area of study, queer theory is rich with accounts of risk, loss, and survival, including stories of building new ways of living and creating a self when dominant societal success narratives fail. Using queer theory to talk about environmental issues aligns this research with “queer ecology,” a cross-disciplinary area of thought that brings ecological theory together with insights from feminist philosophy, gender studies and ecofeminism, and currently exists most prominently as a subset of ecocriticism. While this paper does not contain great engagement with queer ecology, it is inspired by and stands in reference to, in particular, the work of Greta Gaard and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands. Greta Gaard’s interrogation of the relationship between the “natural” and the reproductive is influential,³⁵ as is her insistence on the importance of building coalitions³⁶ and alliances.³⁷ Mortimer-Sandilands argues for the possibility of “queer ecological sensibility,” that is, she believes that queer perspectives offer “important and unique” insights into ecological issues.³⁸ The remainder of this paper represents my efforts to foster a queer ecological sensibility in relation to questions of Anthropocene time, pulling together various areas of queer theory to think through the connections between the reproductive processes of capitalism, environmental degradation, and corresponding feelings of futurelessness. I will focus in particular on discussions of time within queer theory, which are oriented around deviation, survival and the generation and endurance of different modes of living, even in the face of violence and existential threats.

Of distinct interest for this endeavour is those strains of queer theory that provides grounds for reading entanglements of reproduction and futurity. In particular, work within the “antisocial turn” in queer theory investigates the disruptive potential of reproductive failure or refusal. Also known as the “antirelational turn,” this movement of thought originated with the writing of Guy Hocquenghem in the 1970s³⁹ but most was famously developed by Leo Bersani in *Homos*.⁴⁰ Bersani critiques the assimilationist potential of an overly constructionist queer politics⁴¹ and orients instead towards the “self-shattering” and boundary dissolving possibilities of sex (particularly sex between men)⁴² and the “anticommunitarian impulses” that he describes as being “inherent in homo-ness.”⁴³ This account supposes a capacity for homosexual desire to disrupt “the reproduction of the social order,”⁴⁴ due to “infecundity” of (some) gay sex⁴⁵ and the (related) “politically unacceptable and politically indispensable choice” to disobey societal norms and live “an outlaw existence”⁴⁶ in “opposition to community.”⁴⁷

Following Bersani, Lee Edelman is perhaps the best-known theorist within the antisocial turn. In his polemic, *No Future*, Edelman reveals the entwining of future imaginings with heterosexual reproduction, creating “reproductive futurism”⁴⁸ or “heterofuturity.”⁴⁹ The temporality of reproductive futurism is organised around the figure of “the child.”⁵⁰ In this (overwhelmingly Lacanian) account, the child, as an image of the future, closes the gap between the self and subject formed at the arrival of the signifier. In other words, the idea of the future, as embodied in the child, allows for an escape from the alienation created by individual access to meaning through language and other symbols. In this account, politics is inherently future oriented and built around the sustaining and ordering power of fantasy:

Politics ... names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject’s alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history.⁵¹

For Edelman, following Lacan, the “death drive” is the surplus both internal to and outside of meaning that threatens the ongoing coherence of the symbolic order. Within heterofuturity, queerness plays this role. Edelman’s central argument in *No Future* is that queers should embrace this disruptive power: “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social.”⁵² Many who are drawn to Edelman’s account of reproductive futurism balk at this point. This includes

some queer ecological thinkers who have turned to Edelman's account of heterofuturity as a source of conceptual vocabulary for understanding nonreproductive relations to the future,⁵³ for reading the changing figure of the child in relation to "ecological disaster"⁵⁴ and for critiquing "environmental agendas grounded in heterosexist, pro-reproductive rhetoric."⁵⁵ While making valuable use of Edelman's work, these theorists resist his searing negativity and refusal of the future itself.

I argue, however, that Edelman's passionate rejection of the future offers a valuable resource to guide anti-capitalist Anthropocene ethics and politics. This is particularly the case if the future in question is understood as a dominant, hetero-reproductive, *capitalist* future. Indeed, when "[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable,"⁵⁶ it is easy to mistake capitalist futures with all potential futures. But this offers the opportunity for an interesting reading of the Anthropocene. If, as I have suggested above, the Anthropocene is evidence of a failure of the capacity of capitalism to continue to reproduce itself, then the environmental collapse it describes appears here as a kind of queer ecological childlessness. Read through the power of Edelman's negativity, this can be seen as a refusal on behalf of the more-than-human world to continue to reproduce capitalist futures. In doing so, the Anthropocene functions like the death drive, threatening the symbolic order of capitalism. What would it mean to *affiliate* oneself with this death drive, this refusal of capitalist futures? What would it mean to politically side with ecological failure, and declare that a capitalist future is no future at all? The Anthropocene is revealed not as an unfortunate side-effect of capitalism, but as an eruption of the hidden yet unavoidable excess corrupting its most vital logics of production and reproduction and revealing the bankruptcy of its promised futures.

BEYOND REFUSAL: QUEER FUTURITIES

The loss of capitalist futures does not have to mean the loss of all futures; the rejection of these particular imaginaries does not require the refusal of futurity itself. Rather, it may clear the way for the arrival of alternative ways of thinking and living through time. In *No Future*, Edelman hardly touches upon the existence of any world beyond middle-class, white America⁵⁷; he thus is unable to account for vital aspects of the workings and potentialities of reproduction and futurity. As a result, he mistakenly identifies white, cisgendered, hetero-reproductive middle-class futures as the only possible futures. Through this reading, the failure of these dominant images of futurity is therefore a loss of the future itself. However, as

Jack Halberstam points out, failure can be more than an end point; it may contain liberating potentials. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam draws from Edelman to connect hetero-reproductive futurism with capitalism, but sees the refusal of this way of seeing the future as an opening into alternate possibilities.⁵⁸ Halberstam discusses queerness as a liberating “gender failure” and suggests that, along with other failures to meet with heteronormative capitalist success markers (such as “wealth accumulation” and winning of all sort) it “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development.”⁵⁹ That is to say, leaving behind hetero-capitalist ideas of success might open up new and interesting ways of living and being. The conceptualisation of alternative ways of life provide invaluable fuel to the radical imagination in search of possible avenues for movement. Judith Butler points out: “Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”⁶⁰ Further, she talks of the role of fantasy:

fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable....The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.⁶¹

The search for elsewhere may even lead to queer utopian thinking, as can be seen in the work of José Muñoz. A great believer in alternative futures, Muñoz engages with conceptions of queer temporalities in his work on “queer futurities,” which, in reply to Edelman, he describes as a realm of potential “primarily about futurity and hope.”⁶² He says:

Queerness is... performative because it is not simply a being, but a doing toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.⁶³

Muñoz reads queer aesthetics for “blueprints...of a forward-dawning futurity” and believes that art can help us see “the not-yet-conscious.” He situates queerness in the future but reads the past to find the way. Muñoz searches queer art of the past—the 60s and 70s—for traces of their “world-making capacity.”⁶⁴ Calling for a rewriting of the relationship between the past and the future, Muñoz suggests the

possibility of drawing alternative futures from the world as it stands. From here it is possible to argue that to be queer is not just to refuse the primacy of certain modes of reproduction, but to take on others; not just biological reproduction, but also cultural, often in the creation of alternative archives (such as the famous “Lesbian Herstory Archive” in New York) and lineages of information. Eve Sedgwick, wrote of the powerful motivation given to her work by the desire to help young queers survive, and of the powers of cultural objects, “of high or popular culture or both” to become “a prime resource for survival” for young and isolated queer people.⁶⁵

Other models for queer futurity can be found in diverse queer kinship structures, including queer parenthood through fostering, adoption, surrogacy, DIY fertility practices and, increasingly, medicalised fertility services.⁶⁶ There are many queer lineages to be traced within and alongside hetero-reproduction via the influence of other family members as disruption to the nuclear family as closed structure of vertical inheritance⁶⁷ as well as teachers, carers and friends. Consider also the use of queer theory to discuss kinship, connection and entanglement between humans and the more-than-human.⁶⁸ Inspiring also are conversations on radical love that extends beyond biological bounds⁶⁹ and in radically non-teleological concepts empathy.⁷⁰ In search of feelings of possibility, it is worth considering that the capacity of queer children to deviate from the line that constructs a straight identity, despite social pressures towards conformity;⁷¹ reproduction has the capacity to do more than recreate and reinforce previous conditions. Significant also is the threat that each new generation poses to the existing social order, and the extent of enculturation required, often under great duress, for each generation to continue the rhythms, rituals and reproduction of the worlds they are born into.⁷² By revealing the richness and multiplicity of queer relatedness and reproduction, these examples offer material for images of the future beyond hetero-reproductive norms. While these are not necessarily anti-capitalist⁷³, the capacities of queer individuals and communities to create modes of life that diverge from dominant norms provide valuable examples for the creation of alternative futures.

MULTIEPISTEMIC FUTURES

The opening of potential futures via examples of queer futurity and relatedness prompts the question; what other archives exist for the construction of alternative future visions, through which to orient the reproduction of different ways of

life? Even within the West, capitalism is not totalising and monolithic, but rather often “at loose ends with itself” and interspersed with “non-capitalist activities” such as cooperatives and volunteer work⁷⁴, as well as prefiguratively anti-capitalist projects such as communes and free universities, which set out to activity create and preserve alternative values and futures.⁷⁵ To suggest, as Edelman seems to, that all futurity is capitalist, Western, and hetero-reproductive, is to silence the resistance, perseverance and futurity of other ways of being. In addition to dismissing alternative queer futures and the textures of anti-capitalist resistance projects, this oversimplification of futurity has colonial connotations.

As Ghassan Hage explains, for any model of interpreting or shaping the world “there is always an excess”;⁷⁶ while Western capitalist temporalities and futurities are globally dominant, they are not universal, and (as discussed above) their dominance is contingent on historical and ongoing violence and oppression. To treat this dominance as total is to ignore the persistence of other ways of being, including black, Indigenous and other non-Western ways of being, which are sometimes starkly at odds with capitalist goals. Any attempts at building anti-capitalist future imaginaries (including the queer, ecological visions that fascinate this paper) that do not take this into account risk re-inscribing white Western dominance. This is particularly significant in regard to the aforementioned role of colonialism in the creation of capitalism and therefore of the Anthropocene, a connection so profound that Potawatomi scholar-activist Kyle Powys White refers to climate change as “intensified colonialism.”⁷⁷

Reproductive futurity is again a valuable register through which to consider both the active repression of alternative ways of being under global capitalism, and the resistance through which they endure. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Geonpul tribe of the Quandamooka nation) points out that white Western dominance requires constant “reaffirming and reproducing.”⁷⁸ Within and against these processes of continued dominance, other ways of being persist. To fail to engage with these realities is to miss opportunities to connect with and support living alternative futures. It is also to miss the significance of understanding the reproduction of resistance demonstrated, for example, in an American history of black women understanding “the unpaid work that they do for their families” including “teaching children survival skills ... as a form of resistance.”⁷⁹ This is reproduction, and reproductive labour, orienting towards alternative futures.

Work around Indigenous futurities further reveals the future as a realm of rich possibility. Nēhiyaw/ Cree activist and scholar Erica Violet Lee, writes that “[f]ar from being tragic or doomed, as Indigenous communities we are working toward our futures daily... Thanks to the work of generations, Indigenous futures have never been so clear and bright.”⁸⁰ Violet Lee is clear that changes are required for these futures to flourish, highlighting the “ongoing colonial violence that still suffocates Indigenous lives.” She says, “Indigenous futures look like the resurgence of our languages, our knowledges, our governance systems, and journeys home to our traditional territories.” Significantly, Violet Lee explicitly connects these futures to environmental sustainability, and writes, “[a] key requirement for any of these futures to exist is a healthy world capable of sustaining our futures.”⁸¹ When the health of the world, in turn, relies upon alternative future visions, multipistemic literacy⁸² and the creation of the material and political conditions to support a richly “pluriversal” world⁸³ are vital points of focus.

TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE FUTURE IMAGINARIES

Drawing on these different intellectual traditions, the ground for alternative future imaginaries is revealed to be rich and complex. As a parting question, I ask, through what processes might reorientation⁸⁴ toward different future imaginaries occur? For many, especially for those historically best served by the vast inequalities of capitalism, the loss of imagined capitalist futures is deeply disorienting. What is being lost is not just an idea of how life might otherwise have proceeded, but a sense of identity, an ontology, and an ethics; at stake are concepts of self, of what the world is, and of how to select certain courses of action as superior to others. Resistance to such a loss for the sake of identity coherence is easy to anticipate. Imagined futures are difficult to relinquish—this is the case even while that which is being lost refers to what is impossible to obtain or is a cause of great harm. Lauren Berlant introduces the term “cruel optimism” to describe the situation in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”⁸⁵ This is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility.”⁸⁶ Significantly, for Berlant,

an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it: *but its life-organizing status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes* (emphasis added).⁸⁷

For the vast majority of those entangled with them⁸⁸, capitalist imagined futures may be read as such cruel optimisms. They do work for those who pursue them—even as, as evidenced by the onset of the Anthropocene, they destroy capacities for survival, these fantasies help order and structure subjectivities. As they are based on unsustainable and deeply unjust modes of production and distribution, it is both desirable and inevitable that capitalist futures are lost. If transitions to new imagined futures are to be successful, it is also important to treat these losses seriously. For those absorbed by them—tangled with them, constituted through time towards them — the process of moving beyond them is not going to be easy or painless. This shift requires discernment in order to differentiate between, on one hand, dangerous cruel optimisms, and on the other, sustaining fantasies and imaginings of better worlds that rise from or pull into being real political potentiality. There is literacy-building work to do here; queer theories of grief and mourning provide possible resources for this project.

Shifting futurities will require dealing with emotional pain, fear and grief. What does it mean to “let go” of lost futures? What can be learnt from such losses? Writing about mourning, Judith Butler says:

I think... that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance.⁸⁹

Butler is talking about the loss of loved ones, but the questions are transposable: How do I grieve for the loss of the futures I envisioned? Who will I be on the other side of this grief? For Butler, in the experience of grief, “something about who we are is revealed.”⁹⁰ She is talking about the way that the loss of a loved one reveals the way that human subjectivity is, in part, constituted by a social world. Perhaps the grief experienced when mourning visions of particular futures also teaches something about subjectivity. This grief teaches the importance of imagined futures for the temporal coherence of a subject. When (as in the Anthropocene) the grief experienced is for independence from material limitations, it teaches interdependence and entanglement as vital cornerstones for viable futures.

At this juncture, one thing is certain: the future will be truly different from the past. An emergence from capitalist abstractions and corresponding future imaginaries is not, and cannot be, a “going back.” While strategies and inspirations

from the past may prove useful, new conditions will require new responses, and as the Anthropocene promises to be unpredictable and heterogeneous in its outcomes, so too will political strategies need to be situated, diverse and flexible. A difficult future lies ahead, but hopefully not one without possibility. Political opportunity exists within the very experience of precarity and futurelessness, as it reflects increasingly pressing evidence that current dominant systems of production, reproduction and organisation, long unjust and undesirable, are in their most fundamental logics unable to continue indefinitely to participate in the ongoing recreation of the future. Queer ecological sensibilities offer one avenue of exploration as they draw attention to all that lies in excess of these systems. Through processes of affiliation with the nonhuman world and attention to other marginalised discourses and ways of life, queer ecological sensibilities reach toward the potentiality of such excesses and in doing so project alternative imaginaries. In relation to these imaginaries, precarious Anthropocene subjects might extend towards futures currently hidden from view and, in doing so, bring better worlds into being.

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NOTES

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88. Some exception might be allowed for the mega wealthy, especially those who may not live long enough to experience the full force of climate change. That said, the Californian wildfires of November 2018 reached celebrity mansions in Malibu; the protections provided by wealth, although substantial, are not total.
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